



The Percy Portage

BY JOAN SAMPSON

"Sagetewedgewam," meaning river hard to travel, was the Ojibwa name given to the Trent River. Certainly, the stretch from Percy Reach to Rice Lake was difficult to navigate even in a birch-bark canoe. According to early map-makers there was a portage across Percy Township. In 1973, a group of students from Trent University researched the archives and explored the terrain to ascertain the route and its history. This culminated in the publishing of a book "The Percy Portage" and the marking of the one route that they fell was the correct one with metal markers.

Long before Europeans arrived in this part of the continent, Rice Lake was important to the Huron and their relatives the Five Nations of the Iroquois for transportation and as a source of food. In Rice Lake, fish were plentiful and the shallows yielded wild rice. In the 17th century, the Huron and Iroquois were in conflict for the area for hunting and simply because warfare was part of their way of life. It became more serious when they were in economic contention with the arrival of the French at Quebec and the Dutch at New York. Champlain made a visit to Huronia in 1615 because of the strength and tribal connections of the Hurons. He then joined a Huron raid on Iroquois villages near Syracuse and returned to Huronia for the winter. His journal is clear that he came south to Lake Ontario the following year but not about the route he took on his three

passages through the area. Some historians say he probably went south front Rice Lake but Percy Portage is a possibility. After the destruction of the Hurons by the Iroquois in 1649, there was almost a vacuum in central Ontario until the Ojibwa gradually moved in before 1700. The Ojibwa were a large tribe covering a huge area west of the Great Lakes. The bands which came to Ontario were often referred to as Chippewa or Mississauga.

The Trent River describes a large loop from Percy Reach to Rice Lake with waterfalls and rapids and a change of many feet in elevation making navigation difficult and portages necessary. It is likely that a route existed as early as the Point Peninsula period (100 B.C.E. to 300 C.E.). It allowed hunting parties and bands headed to Rice Lake to move more quickly. It seems likely that the portage was used as a fur trade route although only anecdotal evidence is available.

Interest in east central Ontario grew after 1783 as Loyalists were arriving in an area ill prepared to receive them. Samuel Holland, the Surveyor General, and his deputy, John Collins, were directed by the Lieutenant-Governor (at Quebec), Henry Hamilton, to map the Nassau district, to explore the Trent as a practical trade route and to assess the area for settlement and Ille Umber trade. Collins was later directed to report on military defense. His map of 1790 shows a straight line for die portage.

John Collins obtained his appointment as a surveyor in 1764 and so was a mature and experienced professional when the rush was on in 1783 to have townships surveyed to accommodate Loyalist immigrants. A plaque at Kingston attests that he planted "the first survey post under civil authority" in Ontario on October 27, 1783.

"THEY LEFT THEIR MARK"
BY JOHN L. LADELL

Collins' map also noted a salt spring which reputedly produced a gallon of salt from each three gallons of water. It might have been a good local source of precious salt but surveyor William Chewitt, in 1792, found only a spring with a sulfurous smell. Nevertheless, map references continued and the name survives in the creek that flows through Norham and the golf courses on its way to the Trent.

After the war of 1812 in Canada and the Napoleonic Wars in Europe, there was a greater interest in colonial development in respect to settlement and defense and maps were required. Reuben Sherwood sketched and

He showed a portage from land owned by Robinson, a settler at Percy Reach, to a place close to Hastings and suggests that Percy Creek could be used "when it can be made navigable" He suggested paving [macadam surfaces had just come into use] the Indian path and maintaining a fleet of boats at either end of the portage as a way of avoiding the hazards of the Percy Reach-Rice lake traverse.

Lieutenant Smith in his map and notes of 1816-17 names the Percy Portage and shows a path of "15 miles. 6 furlongs and 100 yards" which started west of "little Bobakaijuen" (Hastings) and passed through Dartford and Warkworth before reaching the Trent at Percy Reach. Plans to develop the portage were overtaken by proposals to build a canal on the Trent in the 1820s which was supported by the settlers in the area. It was 100 years before the Trent Canal was finally completed.

The student team from Trent University, after collecting information from archives, registry offices and interviews with local people, decided to map and mark one route. Their choice was the one following Percy Creek. Starting west of Hastings near McGuire's Island (formerly White Stone Island) and proceeding southerly, they marked the path with galvanized metal squares painted fluorescent orange and blue. The path joins Percy Creek north of Brickley and then follows the stream until it empties into the Trent River at Meyersburg in Seymour Township. The students walked the creek in mid-August 1973 through water levels from ankle-deep to several feet. They witnessed the draining of Dartford Pond for repairs which resulted in stronger, deeper flows downstream. The Maiden's Mill pond was also drained that summer with similar results. They concluded that, at certain times of the year, the creek would certainly have been navigable and was likely used by travelers and traders.

Sources: This article is based on The Percy Portage by Ferne Cristall, Gordon Holyer, Beverly Hood, Robin Hood, Michael Levenston and Borge Lind-Peterson.

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